

REVIEW

Brilliant Imperfection: Grappling with Cure by Eli Clare (Duke University Press, 2017)

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What would it take to understand disability as something ordinary or familiar, to frame it “not as a tragedy, but a truth, a shrug of the shoulders, water over rock” (p. 5), “as common as morning coffee” (p. 145)? Or what about gender transition? Is it possible to abandon the language of disorder in favor of metaphors of possibility, seeing “transition [as] a door, a window, a cobalt sky” (p. 177)? For writer and activist Eli Clare, such shifts are possible through a deep and sustained “grappling with cure.” *Brilliant Imperfection*, Clare’s lyrical new book, offers exactly that, a record of his reckoning with the ideology of cure. Moving from memoir to history, from poetry to theory, Clare describes the impact of cure (i.e., the belief that bodies and minds can be determined to be broken and thus in need of fixing) on his own life and the lives of others. The book chronicles Clare’s shifting politics, as he moves from a fiercely anti-cure stance to a more ambivalent, knotty, position.

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Ultimately, “we need neither a wholehearted acceptance nor an outright rejection of cure,” he argues, “but rather a broad-based grappling” (p. 14). Given the hold that cure has on US culture, however, any such examination will require an intensive dismantling of curative logics. Clare devotes most of the book to explaining how cure constrains our imaginations and condones, if not encourages, violence and discrimination.

“At the center of cure lies eradication,” asserts Clare. This claim is essential to his understanding of how cure works (p. 26). As an ideology, cure expects and requires intervention (e.g., medical, political, educational, familial, juridical); cure frames difference as deviance and deviance as the site for action. We miss something essential about the workings of cure if we fail to recognize the compulsory nature of this action as a kind of violence. Clare offers eugenic histories, practices of mass incarceration, and the acceptance of forced and coerced “treatments” to support his position. Although Clare places eradication at the center of cure, he recognizes that it is not the only dimension of curative logics; “diagnosis, treatment, management, rehabilitation, and prevention” (p. 70) are all essential to the workings of cure. Diagnosis is of particular interest to Clare, and he spends most of the book uncovering how diagnosis makes violence possible. The centerpiece of *Brilliant Imperfection* is an extended discussion of how the diagnoses of “feeble-mindedness” and “mental retardation” led to various manifestations of violence against two white girls: Carrie Buck, whose sterilization and institutionalization were upheld by the US Supreme Court in 1927, and Molly Daly, who was removed to Oregon’s Fairview Hospital in the 1950s, where she seems to have suffered intense neglect if not outright violence. Clare foregrounds these two stories because of the instructive ways they resonate and depart from his own, but also because they offer such clear examples of how diagnoses, especially diagnoses of mental and intellectual disability, transform violence into “treatment.” He extends his mosaic around these two stories, underscoring how diagnosis and cure are used in the service of racism, settler colonialism,

sexism, xenophobia, transphobia, and classism.

Clare insists, however, that humans are not the only targets of curative logics. To put it differently, he suggests the primacy of “the human” is part of what fuels such logics. He connects the Terri Schiavo case, in which a woman’s feeding tube was removed at the request of her husband and over the protests of her parents, to an extended rumination over what it means to be alive and whose lives have value. Here he turns to the language of *bodymind* not only as a way of disrupting the medicalized distinction between physical disabilities and mental disabilities or body and mind, but also as a more inclusive frame than “personhood” or “human.” By *bodymind*, as he explains, he means not only “our own human selves,” but also “heron, firefly, weeping willow . . . , dragonfly, birch, barn swallow . . . , goat and bantam rooster, mosquito and wood frog, fox and vulture — the multitude of beings that make home on this planet. I mean all body-minds, regardless of personhood,” because all these bodyminds have value (pp. 29-30). To care about the fate of marginalized people, then, is to care about the fate of the firefly and the wood frog, and vice versa; we cannot draw lines between different kinds of bodyminds. Indeed, it is that act of drawing lines — another manifestation of diagnosis — that makes violence possible. As long as “the human” or “the person” are cast as meriting particular care, then both those categories will be used to render other beings violable.

Although there is a kind of narrative arc to the book, it is more accurate to describe it as a constellation of histories, experiences and theories than a straight forward linear narrative. Clare describes *Brilliant Imperfection* as a “mosaic” composed of “fragments and slivers” through which multiple patterns emerge (p. xv), and the book’s format makes manifest this framing. The book’s ten chapters are each divided into smaller essays, not all of which explicitly connect, and short pieces of poetry and prose — Clare names them “brilliant imperfections” — serve as transition points between chapters. But these moves are not merely matters of style; they mark method as well. *Brilliant Imperfection* often makes its theoretical moves through juxtaposition, comparison, definition,

and repetition. Clare wants his readers to recognize the resonances between seemingly disparate phenomena, asserting that “the desire for eradication is a pattern reaching across time and space” (p. 135), and who better than a poet to trace lines between cornfields and incarceration, between native grasses and desire?

Brilliant Imperfection: Grappling with Cure is an accessible and engaging read for those new to trans* or disability theory and politics, providing useful introductions to ableism, the medical-industrial complex, and the structuring power of diagnosis/diagnoses (including “gender identity disorder” and “gender dysphoria”). Scholars and activists more familiar with these fields will recognize the many places where Clare is both joining and extending current conversations in queer/trans*/disability studies. The second half of the book, in which he dives deeply into the tensions between his desire for gender transition and his distrust of medical interventions, or between his extended critique of institutionalization and his voluntary commitment to a psych ward, are particularly generative. As much as the book is an argument for recognizing the brilliance of imperfection, Clare recognizes that pride often co-exists with shame, and he does not shy away from sharing his own struggles with his readers. Near the end of the book, Clare details some of his strategies for self-care, and those tips, paired with the “Thinking about Trigger Warnings” section in the preface, make clear that Clare imagines people using this text not only as a provocation to think disability differently but also as a tool-kit for survival.

Or, rather, thinking disability differently *is* a tool for survival. “Cure promises us so much, but it will never give us justice” (p. 184), and perhaps those who have been marked as abnormal, deviant, deformed, diseased, dangerous, criminal, contagious, excessive, incompetent, irrational, tired, weak, dependent, sick, ill, or broken can find common ground in trying to imagine otherwise. *Brilliant Imperfection* offers:

a matter-of-fact acceptance of our tics, tremors, stutters, seizures, knots, scars, pain, quirks . . . ; an appreciation for missing teeth and the smarts that stretch food stamps to the end of the month,

for big bellies and wide hips, for the flash of hands signing American Sign Language and typing on assistive communication devices, for dark skin and kinky hair; . . . an embrace [of] our wild femmeness, our handsome butchness, our glorious androgyny.” (p. 167)

Loosening the hold of an unexamined belief in cure makes possible “a world where these moments are common and unremarkable” (p. 167).

Bio

Alison Kafer is a professor of feminist studies at Southwestern University and the author of *Feminist, Queer, Crip*.